From self-help group to life-changing water company

Imagine access to safe water trapping you in a cycle of struggle, preventing you from improving your life? A research-supported self-help group took action in Wandiege community, Kenya, ultimately becoming entrepreneurs running a sustainable water company that’s transforming women’s lives.

Life in Wandiege Community

It’s a half kilometre walk to the River Auji, but the women of Wandiege, a poor informal settlement known as Manyatta B on the east side of Kisumu County, have to walk this distance to fetch their water from the river. Traditionally, women in this region are responsible for fetching water for the whole household, so bear the brunt of poor water access, and of the poor sanitation that plagues the Wandiege Community. It’s not only adult women that are caught in this trap of gender norms and scarce resources that include negative impacts on health, time and energy available for investment in productive activities. Girl children are sometimes forced to be late or even miss school to help their mothers fetch water, impacting on their education.

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The Wandiege Community sought to address their situation. A self-help group was formed with the initial aim of sensitizing the community to the area’s poor water and sanitation situation. Sensitization campaigns were held, community support was solicited and technical advice offered by non-governmental organization, SANA International. These interventions lead to the idea of a water supply project for the region.
Wandiege and Bandani: informal settlements with and without access to safe water.

Critical issues faced
Under Kenya’s Water Act of 2002, WASCOs (Autonomous Water and Sanitation Companies) are given the responsibility to provide water and sanitation services within urban areas. In Kisumu County where the Wandiege Community reside, access to water was to be provided by the Kisumu Water and Sewerage Company (KIWASCO). However, like most other informal, low-income settlements in Africa, Wandiege was not connected to KIWASCO. No water connection and no sewerage system explain why water was a scarce commodity in Wandiege and why poor sanitation and health issues prevailed. Wandiege community needed a solution!

The birth of the water project
The idea of a community water project came to light at the Wandiege Primary School in late 2001, through a programme focussing on health and development in Africa. Through the programme, water and sanitation were identified as major concerns in the area, which needed to be addressed.

Armed with a vision of every resident enjoying clean water and appropriate sanitation facilities, the project sought to:
- Improve residents’ access to safe and clean water by installing 500 water outlets and connections within three years
- Improve the health status of the residents through provision of appropriate sanitation facilities.
- Improve residents’ potential household income through provision of affordable safe and clean water for both domestic and commercial use.
- Ensure full ownership of the project. To achieve this two strategies were used; community participation and involvement and community mobilisation and sensitization.

As a result of the WASCO water connections, residents of Wandiege Community now spend an average of seven minutes per day fetching water compared to the pre-connection thirty-one minute average.

Project impact
With the completion of the WASCO (Wandiege Water and Sanitation Company Ltd) project in 2006 a borehole with a depth of 110 metres, a pumping station, a tower with two storage tanks of 10,000 litres each with small offices at their bases, a 5km pipeline system, seven water kiosks and 60 private connections was realised. Children at Wandiege Primary School were given access to free and clean drinking water from the project as well as electricity in one block of the school building, both of which they still enjoy today. The community was encouraged to construct and use eco-sanitation and sand-platform latrines as opposed to pit-latrines. As a result, access to improved sanitation rose from 7% in 2008 to 43% in 2009. Today, the sanitation issue in Wandiege has improved even more, as further households have taken up this practice.
A comparison between Wandiege households who were connected to the community water supply company, and households in Bandani – another informal settlement with similar characteristics, but with no such intervention – reveals to what extent this intervention has improved the lives of people in Wandiege. In particular, the intervention has benefitted women and girl-children, who are typically expected to take responsibility for “looking for water” in Africa.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Wandiege Connected (N=29)</th>
<th>Bandani (N=60)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time spent to fetch water</td>
<td>7 mins</td>
<td>42 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water consumption/hold/day</td>
<td>135 litres</td>
<td>98 litres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water consumption/capita/day</td>
<td>29 litres</td>
<td>20 litres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of water/month</td>
<td>512 Shs</td>
<td>716 Shs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incidence of water-borne diseases</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to improved sanitation</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wandiege and Bandani: informal settlements with and without access to safe water. As a result of the WASCO water connections, residents of Wandiege Community now spend an average of seven minutes per day fetching water compared to the pre-connection thirty-one minute average. For the woman or girl-child responsible for the household’s water, that, along with decreased exposure to water-borne diseases, is a life-changer. And one that opens up further opportunities for life improvement and transformation.
Call to Action
This article was informed by ‘From self-help group to water company: The Wandiege Community Water Supply Project’ by Samuel O. Owuor & Dick Foeken. Link to original research [here](#).

Contact Details
This website article is the result of an initiative that involved UoN’s Research, Production and Extension Unit providing Research Uptake Communications support to a researcher, to enhance awareness of development research being done at the University.

**Researcher:**
Dr. Samuel Owuor, Senior Lecturer, Geography and Environmental Studies, University of Nairobi, Email: samowuor@uonbi.ac.ke

**Communications:**
Susan Wanjiru Muchina, Administrator, Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research, Production and Extension), University of Nairobi
Email: swmuchina@uonbi.ac.ke

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